In Conversation: Jacklyn Cock

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info@idrc.ca

Remember the global peace dividend, the budget surpluses that were supposed to result from the raising of the Iron Curtain and the end of the arms race? As war-torn societies in the Middle East, Latin America, and parts of Africa found peace and began building democratic societies, governments were supposed to use the money they once spent on the military to better meet basic human needs. But has it happened?

In South Africa, this process has been underway since the early 1990's, but it has been uneven and fragile, with contradictory outcomes such as an increased emphasis on arms export and a rise in banditry and criminal gangs. *From Defence to Development: Redirecting Military Resources in South Africa*, edited by Jacklyn Cock and Penny McKenzie, argues that South Africa must go beyond a narrow conception of the process and focus instead on the redirection of military resources, both human and material, toward sustainable development and environmental restoration. Last year, IDRC Reports interviewed Jacklyn Cock about her book.

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Where is the impetus for demilitarization coming from in South Africa?

It's an interesting convergence of interests which, I think, is what gives us our potential. There is pressure on the military establishment, the 'security family' as they like to call themselves, to rationalize. The impetus to rationalization means that there is a convergence of interests between the military establishment [SANDF], which needs to rationalize in terms of defence budget cuts, and the demilitarization movement, which is a very small embryonic movement that exists in small organizations, such as Cease-Fire, Gun Free South Africa, and the Group for Environmental Monitoring (GEM). [The movement] is very shallow in its social composition. It tends to be dominated by white middle-class people, and that is a terrible weakness.

How high a priority do you think the government has given demilitarization?

They are very, very conflicted because I think there is enormous pressure on us — by 'us' I mean the ANC — to address problems of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. So the arguments coming from the arms industry and the military about jobs and foreign exchange are extremely powerful ones and the ANC government is having to do a very complicated balancing act. The whole emphasis in South Africa is on building consensus, reconciliation, trying to create a common society, to integrate a range of interests.

Also, because the demilitarization movement is so weak and its social base is so shallow — for reasons which relate to the ANC adopting the armed struggle in the 1961 — there is a general tendency to see violence as a legitimate solution to conflict and problems. So there is not a strong peace movement and I think for that reason the ANC government is not prioritizing demilitarization. I think there are conflicting but powerful arguments within the post-apartheid state ... about the capacity of the SANDF to contribute to development, as a source of employment, as a source of skills, the capacity of the arms industry to generate foreign exchange, as a sort of repository of technological advance, and so on.

Obviously, the NGO community has taken a lead role in the demilitarization campaign, as it demonstrated in the landmines movement. How far does this extend to other parts of South African society?

It's very limited, The landmines campaign is a very interesting example to learn from. In Gun-Free [South Africa], we are trying to get the banning of private possession of firearms and trying to learn from the landmines campaign. I think part of its success was its very broad base of appeal. For example, landmine victims, a lot of the people who supported that campaign were ex-combatants and soldiers, who themselves had experienced injuries from landmines. Also, and this is very important, the manufacturers of landmines in South Africa are now involved in de-mining. It's 'double-dipping', that's the term to describe it. In other words, their production and profits could be incorporated into a new agenda that wouldn't be obliterated by the banning of landmines. I think that was part of what made that campaign so effective, that it was able to appeal to a very wide range of interests and to the producers themselves because they saw the possibilities of getting involved for millions and millions of bucks.

What sorts of problems have arisen as a result of demilitarization?

It's proceeding in a very uneven way. One of our major demands is for the return of closed military bases, because the military is the fourth largest land controlling authority in South Africa. There should be a massive closure of military bases in order to meet people's demand for land, and as part of the whole rationalization process. One big problem there is that the land is being contaminated through military exercises. There is a lot of environmental damage and the cost of repairing it is massive. I suppose a broader issue is the lack of capacity in civil society, the lack of a mass-based demilitarization movement, to make demands for demilitarization to redirect resources, power, and opportunities from the military to development agencies.

How about demilitarization creating more unemployment?

Exactly, that's the other worry. Especially because these are people with skills in techniques of violence and often with access to firearms, and so there is a real worry that even the rationalization, which the SANDF is committed to this year (1998) is going to lead to increases in crime because ex-combatants can't find jobs. They lack marketable skills because many of them ... went for military training instead of education. So, it's a dilemma. There are short term costs involved, and

one [issue] is the possible destabilization in relation to unemployment and ex-combatants, demobilized soldiers. The other is that, in the arms industry, the whole process of conversion can lead to unemployment in the short term. It's a complex and uneven process with short term costs, but of course I would see great long term gains. I think as part of this society, as part of the legacy of war, one of the crucial things we have to do to consolidate democracy is to shift resources in this way and concentrate on addressing our real inner needs, which are poverty, unemployment, social disintegration.

What do you view as the ideal size and role of the SANDF?

I don't think we should have an army at all. I don't see any point in it. I think we have an army for simply nationalistic reasons, that people think it's part of being an independent nation-state to have an army, but there's no logical reason at all. [Even] the military plan has accepted that there is no conventional military threat at present and that our real threats are socio-economic. ... We should go the Costa Rican model and abolish the army like they did in 1948. It's a very different society, much smaller, more homogeneous, very differently placed in relation to the United States, and they have a highly militarized police force. I think there is a need to shift resources into policing and to develop community policing. That's where the resources should go.

How do you hope your book will be used?

To build capacity. [I hope] that non-academic people, policy makers, people interested in the challenges that face a post-apartheid government, will read it and presumably get involved in the demilitarization movement, because I think that's the answer for us to develop that movement and give it a mass base, for us to really have an impact on policy. I'm pleased with it. It's very comprehensive, it covers a range of issues in different ways. I think all of it — and we tried very hard to do this — is [written] at an accessible level, so it is not a heavy academic book.

What recommendations do you have for policy makers and development experts who might use the book?

To rethink the notion of security. Security is a real concern of all peoples and in our context there are two important shifts that need to happen. One is that people shouldn't see security in military terms because the military is actually a threat to our security because of the way they cannibalize resources and pollute the earth. The military is a threat to our security and people need to recognize that. One also needs to think about security, not in terms of the nation-state, but in broader, global terms, because many of the things which threaten us, such as pollution and holes in the ozone layer, are beyond the capacity of the nation-state to deal with.

There is also personal security. The increasing incidents of violence, particularly domestic violence and child abuse in South Africa, are all indicators of social disintegration and social tensions deep in the society. People need to see that this is part of the legacy of war, and that part of reconstruction and consolidating democracy is to rethink our understanding of security and rethink our understanding of violence. I'm focussing on security and violence because these issues are close to ordinary people's experiences.

Could the present SANDF not be used in a reconstruction role, such as helping to police townships?

That is happening now. But the difficulty is that they are trained as soldiers, not in non-violent means of conflict resolution. That would be one way of thinking about it. But another, more effective way would be to, say, redirect those resources, including personnel, into policing and the

retraining that policing requires, as opposed to border control and defending the territorial integrity of the country, which is the whole mindset of soldiers.

Soldiers could be used in development projects, ... but I think it is a way of rationalizing the existence of the SANDF and trying to find a role for it. I think it is potentially dangerous because we have inherited a very militarized past where the military was very central in the whole society in political, ideological, economic ways. We have to dismantle that, and the way to do so is to minimize their role and limit it as much as possible.

About the Authors

Jacklyn Cock is Professor of Sociology at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. She was a founder of the Group for Environmental Monitoring (GEM) and leader of the IDRC-funded project "Militarization and the Ecology of Southern Africa." Penny Mckenzie currently coordinates GEM's "Defence and Development" project. She also coordinated the "Militarization and the Ecology of Southern Africa" project.

The Book

From Defence to Development: Redirecting Military Resources in South Africa, edited by Jacklyn Cock and Penny McKenzie